



*North again  
to  
Copenhagen*

*By Motor Yacht  
(Haines 340 - 'Merganser')*

*By Colin Gordon*



My wife, Joyce, and I have been sailing together for more than forty years, in racing dinghies to start with, and cruising yachts for the last twenty. As we approached the dreaded three score years and ten we started to think about a change to our boating. As we talked to other “yachties” and to the motor boat salesmen at the boat shows, we realized that there are many others thinking exactly the same way.

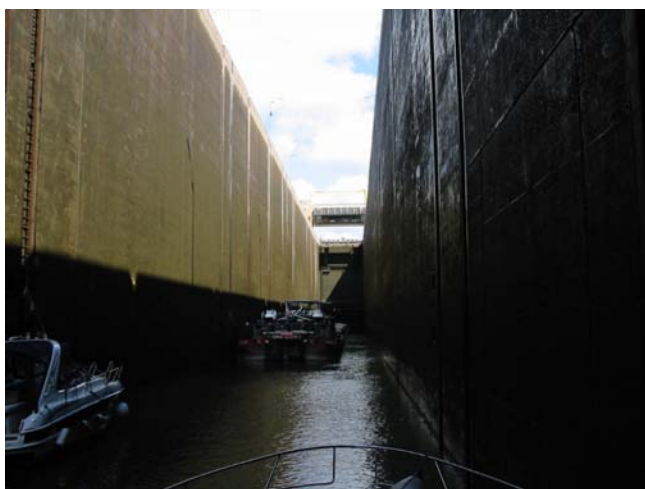
We were finding that our wonderful Starlight 39 “Mandalay” was getting ‘a bit too much to handle’ so we thought long and hard about how we could stay on the water and continue to mess about in a boat. After eighteen months of research we found “Merganser”, a Haines 340 Offshore that was built in 2000. She is a twin screw motor yacht with two 170 hp Yanmar diesel engines. She has a semi displacement hull, which means that at 3000 revs she gets up on the plane and cruises at 11.5 knots for a sustained period - 9 hours across the channel from Portsmouth to Le Havre or from Chichester to Dover. At slower speeds she is directionally stable and easy to handle so is ideal for cruising on the inland waterways of Europe of which there are 40,000 kms. We chose a boat of less than 35ft intentionally in order to keep mooring, maintenance and fuel costs down. She is just under 34ft long. The good news was that the accommodation in this size of motor boat is very good because the square box like shape for most of the length gives a much bigger volume compared with a similar length of sailing boat. Merganser is just like a floating apartment and we just love living on board.

2008 was the centenary of the formation of the Cruising Association, and so we decided to cruise North to Copenhagen where many of our friends in the Baltic Section of the Association had decided to hold a Grand Rally and celebratory Dinner at the headquarters of the Royal Danish Cruising Club at Rungsted.

Research showed us that the best “flat water” route that would be least affected by any bad weather that might crop up, would be through the Netherlands and up the River Rhine to Wesel in Germany, and then across a network of canals through North West Germany to the ancient Hanseatic City of Lubeck, passing close to the cities of Dortmund, Munster, Minden, Hannover and Braunschweig. We would enter the Baltic Sea at Travemunde and cruise through the Islands of Southern Denmark up to Copenhagen.

We set off on the 3rd of May and immediately encountered Easterly headwinds that lasted for a whole month. We had thought that we understood about “wind against tide” conditions from our sailing experiences, but with a motor cruiser where flat water is so essential for a quick comfortable run we have become even more aware. On coastal or open water passages flat water equates to “wind with tide”, so it is now quite common for us to make passage against wind and tide if the wind direction is against us. We often set off in the early hours of the morning, too, before the sea breeze sets in. This was particularly so for the passage from Eastbourne to Dover. The forecast was for Easterly 4 increasing to 5 or 6 each day for the next three days.

While we delayed for a day we noticed that at 5am the wind was nil and it did not really increase until 11am. The tidal stream atlas also showed that the greatest current, westgoing with the wind, around Dungeness, where it can chop up badly, would be at 8am. At 5am the next day we locked out of Sovereign Marina with the fishing boats and had a dead flat sea all the way. By Dungeness the wind was up to 10 knots against us and the current was running at 2½ knots + around the headland, but the water was as flat as a pancake. We had to motor an extra 10 miles compared to the distance over the ground, but it was an excellent passage and by 11am we were filling up with fuel in Dover Harbour.



It took five coastal hops from Chichester to Eastbourne, Dover, Dunkirk, Breskens and through the storm barrier at Neeltje Jans at the mouth of the Oosterschelde to Zerikzee, to make it into the waterways of the Netherlands. Once in Zerikzee it did not matter what the wind strength and direction was because, on the canals, it never gets rough enough to stop us from moving on if we really want to. Unfortunately it was a wet and drizzly day when we made a stop at Arnhem where we were made very welcome at the Rowing Club. We took time to visit the Airborne Forces Museum and Military Cemetery that commemorate the famous battle for the bridge there in September 1944. It was very moving to see how the local people have taken their liberators to their hearts in spite of the havoc and devastation that descended on them as a result of that battle.

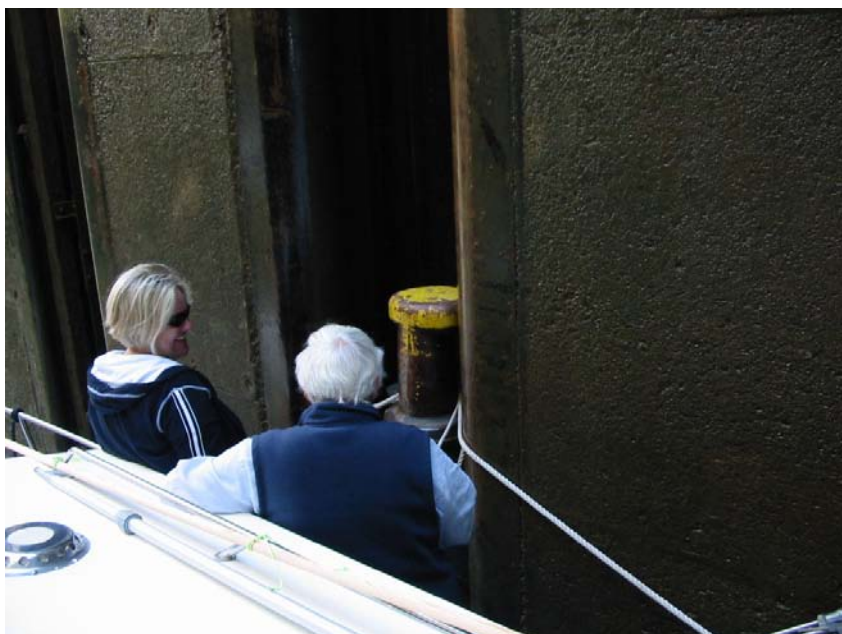
Then it was time to join the River Rhine and push the current for 50 miles up stream to Wesel. We were taken by surprise by the volume of barge traffic and by the size and speed of the barges. We could not let our concentration waver for a moment. It was not possible to just follow one or other barge because they travel at such different speeds. The most heavily laden are well down in the water with side decks awash and only making about 6 knots so it is necessary to find a good moment to overtake, but that may mean opening up the throttles to full speed. The empty barges on the other hand are high out of the water and power along at 10 or 12 knots and can be very menacing as they appear behind you or come towards you in the middle of the river. They have absolute rights over recreational craft so it was up to us to keep out of their way. The river was very fast flowing, too, at about 3 knots, and to control erosion, in many places, the banks are lined by shingle groins that create back eddies and conflicting currents. We finally settled into a routine of changing helm every half an hour so that we could rest from concentrating so hard. A massive amount of freight and materials is transported all over North Germany by the barges. Their waterways stretch from the Rhine to the North Sea and the Baltic and eastwards to Poland, Russia and the Czech Republic. We saw just as many barges flying the Polish and Czech ensign and carrying coal and ballast as we saw German and Dutch.

It took us a day to make the passage from the Dutch border to Wesel and there we turned North East into the canal system proper. The barges always take priority at locks so we sometimes had to wait, but we found the lock keepers, barge skippers and German pleasure boaters very helpful. The canals pass mainly through the countryside and rarely go near to towns or villages like they do in France and The Netherlands, so shopping for groceries and fuel had to be planned carefully. We found that few people in these areas spoke English. We had to delve deep into our memories to revive our rudimentary German, and with a right old mixture of words and some common sense we managed to get by.

We had a fairly tight schedule in order to meet up with family and to get to the Rally on time so we felt that we had to push on each day, although, in the end we had some days to spare. Our regular routine was to set off each morning at 8am-ish as soon as we were up. We would take it in turns to steer while we each had breakfast, cleared away and carried out our morning ablutions. Mid morning coffee and lunch were prepared and consumed en route and in this way we kept up a good average mileage close to the limit of 12 km per hour. In this way we managed to cover between 45 nm and 60 nm by mid afternoon, when we were usually ready to look for a suitable resting place.

The maps and charts of these waterways are very comprehensive, but are in German. However, they are very pictorial and easy to understand except for the odd word, when the help of the locals proved useful.

Unlike France, the locks are few and far between with substantial drops in water level. They are large constructions with bollards set in alcoves in the wall far apart, to suit the barges. Far too far apart for us to be able to attach a bow and stern line to separate bollards, so it was necessary to moor to a single bollard with a centre line and bow and stern lines all round the one bollard. By adjusting the tension on the warps it is possible to hold the boat alongside, in spite of any turbulence, most of the time. We only, very nearly, lost complete control on one occasion. The bollards are set in a vertical line down the wall of the lock and about 2m apart. As the boat descends, or rises, often quite quickly, it is necessary to pick the moment to lift the warps off the bollard one at a time and drop them over the next one up or down. It definitely helps to be tall for this task and Joyce(5'2") and daughter Jo(5'2") had some anxious moments while trying to reach up and complete the transfer in time. All part of the FUN really!!!



The average fall is 7 to 8 metres (23ft) but the locks at Eulzen and Luneburg on the Elbe Seiten Kanal are exceptional. At Eulzen the water drops 28m (96ft). Fortunately the bollards are floating and descend down a channel in the side wall of the lock so it is only necessary to make fast once. At Luneburg there is a ship lift. Here you moor alongside in the all metal basin, which is 100m x 12m x 3.4m deep. Once all the gates are closed and sealed the whole basin descends 38m (125ft) on massive cables, just like a hotel lift. This takes less than 6 minutes. It was the most weird sensation, because it felt as if we and all the boats in the basin with us were stationary, and the rest of the world around us was moving upwards.

Along these canals there were plenty of free mooring places in old disused side tributaries out of the way of the wash from passing barges. They were often incorporated in nature reserves but they had no facilities and were usually in the middle of nowhere. We mainly stopped at one of the many Motor Yacht Clubs along the way. Most towns had one or two but they were usually quite a long way outside the main centre. They were self help clubs on the whole, with a restaurant and bar run by a couple on a franchise basis, open most days and with very good facilities. In most cases there was a very nice clubhouse with lawns running down to the waters edge and outdoor facilities for barbeques and enjoyment of the good life in the fresh air. They were well used, too, and the members were very friendly and helpful to us. At the ancient Hanseatic City of Lubeck we were able to moor in the old harbour close to the centre where everything was only a short walk away, including the marzipan museum.

After the Rally in Copenhagen, which was very very enjoyable, we made our way straight back to the North German Baltic Sea coast and visited some places that had been in Communist East Germany until twelve years ago. The Government is spending millions of Euros in this area, and in many old towns and cities like Rostock, Wismar and Warnemunde they are refurbishing the beautiful old buildings and providing lots of new facilities. We visited two brand new super marinas and many of the small yacht clubs are getting help to improve their berthing and visitor facilities.

We retraced our steps to join the River Rhine at Duisburg and from there, with the current behind us this time, we made our way 100km to Nijmegen in the Netherlands in one day.

The Dutch canals, away from the Waal (the Dutch name for the Rhine) are smaller quieter and more gentle places, with towns and villages bordering the water and with quays where it is possible to stop for lunch. From Nijmegen we made our way to a beautiful lake, just off the River Maas, where we had been recommended to leave "Merganser" for the winter. The lake is called Mookerplas and is a boating paradise, with quiet corners to anchor in solitude and a bathing beach in another corner where they say that on a good summer's day many of the locals take the opportunity to sunbathe and swim.

The Marina Eldorado is tucked into yet another corner, has very good facilities and friendly staff, and so we have entrusted our lovely boat to them to put away in a vast hangar for the winter. They will have her back in the water and ready again for us by Easter 2009, and then we have promised ourselves that we will just meander south into France in search of the sun – Next Year the weather **WILL** be better, and we intend to avoid schedules.